

Use of new media by the young in India: Need of Parental Mediation

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Abstract

With increasing access and use of Internet enabled services in India, the social ramifications of these technological tools and services come to the center stage of discussion. Today, the Internet driven new/digital media is not only an information resource or an entertainment tool but also a virtual platform or an assembly of people. People form online groups to discuss issues, chat and socialise among themselves, anonymously at times. This virtual platform may be enriching and convenient for social interactions, business and marketing, but certain age groups, particularly the young between the age group of 14-18 years are vulnerable to such platform assemblies. Here comes the role of parental mediation. Parental mediation may be in the form of solicitation for better and beneficial uses, counseling and intervening in the use of these technological tools and services to ensure the young one's online safety and also to facilitate optimum utilisation of these tools and services. This article puts an analysis of parental monitoring of Internet driven new/digital media by the young. While referring to different studies and experiences around the world, an attempt has been made to explain the need for parental monitoring in Internet uses by the young. It has been concluded that the young in India do need some form of parental monitoring in their use of new/digital media tools and services.

Keywords: Social media, youth, parental monitoring, digital media, online groups.

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INTRODUCTION

While Internet in India took more than a decade to move from 10 million to 100 million and 3 years from 100 to 200 million, it took only a year to move from 300 to 400 million users. Currently, India has the third largest Internet users' base in the world but it is estimated that India will overtake the US as the second largest Internet users' base in the world, behind China only. Further, 32% of the users are College students followed by 26% young men. Significantly, there has been a huge spurt in the number of people accessing Internet on a daily basis in urban India. As on October 2015, 69% of users use Internet on a daily basis. This daily user base has gone up by 60% from that of last year (IAMA 17 November, 2015). This rapid growth in Internet access and users is a heartening trend but it brings with it some threats as well, particularly in relation to Internet uses by the young who face the concerns raised by cyber bullying, contact with strangers, easy access to porn material and other age-inappropriate information (McAfee, Synovate study, 2011). Therefore, social ramifications of new media particularly in relation to family and young children have emerged as a prime focus of study. Here an attempt has been made to explain the need for parental intervention in some form in Internet driven new media/digital media use by the young in India by referring to parental mediation practices, experiences and research studies around the world.

PARENTAL MEDIATION: GLOBAL EXPERIENCES

Parental mediation of children while they use Internet driven media involves the regulation of children Internet use by parents in order to maximise benefits and in particular to minimize the potential negative impacts of the Internet on children. It has been identified that when mediating children digital media uses, parents primarily favour social mediation over technical restrictions and restrictive rule making. While using social mediation they prefer staying nearby or sitting next to child while they are online. And if they use technical restrictions filtering software is more popular than monitoring software. Also, when making rules on Internet use, firstly parents favour restrictive rules to instructive rules; secondly more educated parents do not use technical software because they trust their children. However, less educated parents may not know how to use such software. Rules

governing children's online activities are guided more by moral panic and economic reasons than by the awareness of which online activities carry which form of risk. Thirdly, parents prefer multiple mediation strategies to single ones. Fourthly, parental mediation depends upon parent's characteristics i.e. parental role, education, and Internet use; for example, mothers engage in all types of parental mediation more than fathers (Livingstone and Helsper, 2007: 619-643; Livingstone and Helsper, 2008: 581-599). Also, Mendoza (2009: 28-41) examines three strategies of parental mediation—co-viewing, restrictive mediation, and active mediation—in order to make connections, challenge, and raise questions for media literacy. Co-viewing, whether it is intentional practice, or whether it functions to promote media literacy, is debated by Mendoza. Restrictive mediation, how it connects to protectionism, and whether restriction serves as a form of media literacy are also debated. Lastly, active mediation and whether it relates to an inquiry model of media literacy, is discussed. Mendoza (2009: 28-41) concludes with suggestions for future research on parental mediation and media literacy in the hope of advancing parents' media education.

Having mentioned various parental mediation/intervention practices involved in the exercise to ensure the welfare of our children, we must also look at it with the dimension of family involvement. In view of the findings, that mothers engage in all types of parental mediation more than fathers, one question becomes pertinent. Is it the gender attribute only which plays a significant role in the mediation practices prevalent at home? To ensure the wellbeing of the children, it has to be an equal effort on the part of the parents. Furthermore, Lim & Soon (2010: 205-216) find that consistent with their counterparts in other countries, Chinese and Korean mothers played a significant role in technology domestication because they typically ran the household; they were their children's primary caregivers and were thus intensively involved in raising and nurturing them. Principally, they had some influence over product acquisition and were mainly responsible for supervising the children's ICT use. Notably however, cultural conceptions of motherhood and maternal responsibility, the premium placed on academic achievement by children, as well as the two societies' highly positive outlook on technology greatly influence how Chinese and Korean mothers co-use and supervise their children's use of ICTs. Findings of this study also suggest the strengths

and limitations of domestication theory when applied to Asian settings and the ever-changing media environment. When considering the family dynamics, we shouldn't leave aside the fears of children being bullied when not assisted by their parents. Even if they are at home, there is a greater need for them to socialise with their peers. On several counts, this socialisation doesn't remain the same as we hope it to be. Patchin & Hinduja (2006: 148-169) find that many children have easy access to technological devices such as computers, Skype, cameras, Internet, and mobiles. These technologies can be used for productive reasons, but have recently become a means for children to become bullies and use the technology to make threats against other children. Cyber bullying has become a serious problem, inflicting psychological, emotional, and social harm to many victims. Ybarra and Mitchell (2004: 1308-1316) found that 20-25% of offenders and victims replied that they used cigarettes or alcohol, and 50% of the victims or offenders reported that their parents poorly monitored their online activities. With these observations, we are again made to review our stake on the question of monitoring children.

EURO BAROMETER STUDIES

The Euro barometer can be considered as one of the rigorous and exhaustive research endeavors undertaken to investigate the mediation practices in European countries. Data from Euro barometer in 2008 on parents' awareness of risk issues regarding children online activities confirms most findings from the EU Kids Online project but also raises new issues for some European countries. Especially in Portugal (with other southern European countries as well), parents' concern regarding children online activities is now apparently one of the highest in Europe.

As we have seen, there is an intricate relation between perceptions, attitudes and actual practices when it comes to online activities and risks. This is the specific case of parents' awareness of their children online activities and the strategies they apparently adopt to prevent (or enhance) the risks (or opportunities) that their children might face online. As the Euro barometer points out, risk perception does not necessarily lead to the adoption of any specific measures, but that doesn't mean either that parents don't take any measures. Additionally, parents own Internet experience seems to

matter in their assessment of online risks (but not as clearly as one could imagine) on what they actually do. Children's age also seems to play an important role in explaining not only parents' perceptions but also the way they seem to set rules or attempt different mediation strategies (Barbosa et al, 2011).

Results show that the presence of mediators varies according to the location of the child's use of the Internet, the household being the most frequent location of access. Despite the fact that one third of Brazilian children aged 5 to 9 use the Internet unsupervised, when he/she is not alone, the mother is perceived as the most present person during this activity. Results also reveal that household socio-economic status and mediation strategies are not independent variables. Brazilian parents favour social mediation strategies rather than technical ones. Furthermore, parents who use Internet are more likely to be present during the child's Internet use, implying the importance of media literacy for parents. Public school teachers also perceive that their level of ICT skills are not up to the mark and this is a barrier for greater use of technologies in the school environment. This necessitates the importance of the promotion of media literacy among teachers also. Therefore, addressing issues related to media literacy among educators and parents is essential to promote a safe use of new interactive digital media.

REVIEW OF STUDIES ON NEED OF PARENTAL MEDIATION

Today, the young (age 14-18 years) grow in a media rich environment and use of Internet enabled new/digital media is very much a part of their lives while they grow. These kids born after 1990 very much grew in the laps of ICT driven media environment. Palfrey and Gasser (2008) call them 'Digital natives'. They attribute their arrival to the human civilisation at the time when social digital technologies such as Usenet and bulletin board systems came online. These 'digital natives' have access to networked digital technologies and they possess innate ability to use them. Teenagers are connected to one another by a common major cultural aspect of their lives — social interactions, friendships and their social activities are mediated by digital technologies. These 'digital natives' have created a 24x7 network that blends the human with the technical to a degree we haven't experienced before, and it is perhaps transforming human relationships in fundamental ways.

Some proponents of digital media would argue that it helps us with a platform to express our opinion over issues, helps us bridge down the geographical distance and connect with people on social networking platforms and forums. Yet, it goes without saying that there are possible threats at such forums as well. Berg and Leenes (2011: 211-232) opine that social network sites lack a common mechanism used by individuals in everyday interactions to manage the impressions they leave on others and protect their privacy/audience segregation. The lack of this mechanism significantly affects the level of users control over their self-presentation in social network sites. They emphasise that audience segregation is not only important in real life, but vital, yet currently undervalued and overlooked for the protection of one's self images and privacy in social network sites. Having such observations, one would definitely ask what possible measures can be taken to ensure welfare of one's children. Here, parental intervention in some form becomes imperative.

Online communication has become central in the social life of late childhood and adolescence. Such extensive use of online communication elicits mixed reactions among adults. Scholars and practitioners have expressed concern that online communication leads to shallow relationships, and risks of online solicitation and cyber-bullying. In contrast, it has also been argued that online communication provides opportunities for identity exploration, access to social support and information, and the opportunity to develop meaningful relationship. Children and teens are frequent users of online communication. A study in the U.S. showed that 79 percent of youth aged 12 to 17 had sent messages to friends in the previous week using a social networking site, 69 percent had sent a text message, 56 percent had sent instant messages (IM) to friends, and 44 percent had sent E-mails. In Europe, a study of 29 European countries found that 62 percent of children aged 9 to 16 use instant messaging, 11 percent write or read a weblog and 59 percent have a social networking profile. Online communication has become an integral part of the culture of children and youth. Its widespread diffusion is associated with the network effect, indicating that the extensive use of E-mail, instant messaging and social networking sites by teens is a result of its diffusion through social networks (Mesch, 2013: 287-288).

Parents are under increasing pressure to monitor their children online behavior and practices. This reflects a neoliberal regulatory regime that places the burden of protecting children on parents. Data protection legislations in some countries purports to give parents control by requiring websites that target children to solicit parental consent before collecting, using and disclosing personal information from children (that is, less than 13 to 18 years of age, depending on the legal jurisdiction). This in effect creates a binary switch. Parents either consent or their children cannot participate in the online community. In addition, online companies have been active promoters of media education initiatives that promote parental surveillance. Companies like Microsoft, Google and Verizon routinely sponsor public education sites that link parents directly to monitoring software and urge them to use online filters and other technical controls to protect their children (Steeves, 2012: 356).

Parents have an important role when it comes to protecting and educating youth so that they are able to deal with the aggressive acts of their peers and ‘predatory’ adults. Thus, it is desired to maintain open lines of communication with their teens and use evaluative and restrictive mediation techniques to teach them about online safety (Subrahmanyam and Smahel, 2010: 208). The Internet has become an important vehicle for communication across the globe since the late twentieth century. Internet usage worldwide continues to grow. Recently, it has been reported that 21.3 per cent Africans, 31.7 per cent of Asians, 68.6 per cent of Europeans, 84.9 per cent of North Americans, 67.5 per cent of Australians and 49.3 per cent of Latin Americans have access to the Internet. And the world average stands at 39.0 per cent. Asia has the largest number of Internet users and number of Internet users in India ranks third in the world (Internet World Stats, 2013 Q4). In its original form, the Internet looked very different from how it looks today. Rather than being a space where people could engage in social networking, date or surf the web, it was intended to be a tool via which data could be moved around more easily (Abela and Walker, 2013). A study of 222 children in Korea by Lee & Chae (2007: 640-644) investigated the effect of four parental mediation techniques. Evaluative mediation measured as parents recommendation of websites and co-use of the Internet were related to children’s use of the Internet for educational purposes. Restrictive mediation,

such as time limits and website restrictions was not related to the type of Internet use by the young.

Lwin, Stanaland and Miyazak (2008: 205-217) emphasise that the online environment is potentially harmful to children of various ages, from preteens to older teens. Further, in a dismissive fashion, they reject any defense against this unsafe online environment. However, in their opinion this issue has received a significant attention in the popular press and from public policymakers; no academic research has examined how children react to proposed website safeguards, and how parental mediation strategies may moderate those reactions. In their findings they identified two quasi-experimental studies which find definite evidence that, although website safeguards can be useful in curtailing the children's willingness to disclose personal identifying information in an online environment, the effectiveness of those safeguards is moderated by the type of parental mediation experienced by the child. Online retailers, parents, and educators should take heed of the results not only as a reason for changing approaches to protecting children on the Internet, but as a potential method as well.

Whatever the negative effects of media on children, they can be mitigated, and perhaps even redirected to become positive changes, through positive interaction and dialogue in the home. Such parental mediation, as it is called, can take any of three general forms. Active mediation involves talking with children about the media. This mediation may be either positive (e.g., endorsement of content) or negative (e.g., criticism of content). It may be fully intended as mediation (strategic mediation) or thought of by those doing it only as incidental conversation (non-strategic mediation). Restrictive mediation involves setting rules and limits on media use or screen time, a strategy used by most parents, at least occasionally. This could come in the form of preventing viewing certain programs, websites, or disallowing media use outside certain allowed hours. In other families, it takes the form of limits on overall TV/Media viewing or screen time. The final form of parental mediation is co-viewing, that is, watching television/media content with children. Most scholars agree that co-viewing TV with young children is very helpful, though admittedly not always realistic, especially as the child grows older (Harris and Sanborn, 2013).

There exist differences in mediation practices among different countries. A study on parental mediation shows those parents from Northern European countries such as Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands practice above average active mediation of use but below average restrictive mediation. Eastern European countries such as Lithuania, Estonia or Romania are characterized by below average active and restrictive mediation. Especially in Turkey, Austria, Italy and Belgium, parents do more restrictive mediation and less active mediation than the European average. High active and high restrictive mediation is characteristic of some Southern European countries (such as Portugal, Spain and Greece) and is also found in big European countries - France, Germany and the UK (Duerager and Livingstone, 2012).

While considering the development of the child vis-à-vis the concern of their development in the context of their ICT and Internet usage, we must look at the micro systems in which our children are growing. Johnson (2010) argues that the presence of digital technologies in children's immediate environments is increasing day by day and these environments are rooted in our homes, schools and communities. She further suggests the need for an ecological techno-micro system. The ecological techno-micro system situates the developing child in the context of Internet use in home, school, and community environments. In her empirical study, she finds that these techno elements are a part of our everyday use and reality. She notes down the concept of Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977: 513-531) which was developed much before the arrival of the Internet, dealt with the then available technology i.e. Television, and situates it in the context of the modern technological tools and devices ordinarily found in our households. Her empirical findings suggest that as children's age and grade increased, Internet use tended to increase; correlation strength was strongest for school-based Internet use. Johnson (2010) further establishes that emotional development and physical development were not related to any type of Internet use in any context (i.e., home, school, or community). However, her findings also indicate that cognitive development as rated by teachers was found related to Internet use at home and exchanging emails and visiting websites at school. Findings were significant correlations between specific uses of the Internet

in specific contexts and specific measures of child development and thus support the theoretical utility of the ecological techno-micro system. The developmental consequences of Internet use varied as a function of elements of the micro system (e.g., home and school characteristics) and elements of the technology (e.g., instant messaging versus email).

Leung and Lee (2011: 1-21) examined how demographics, addiction symptoms, information literacy, parenting styles and Internet activities can predict 'Internet risks'. Data was gathered from a probability sample of 718 adolescents and teenagers, aged 9–19 in Hong Kong, using face-to-face interviews. Their results showed that adolescents who are often targets of harassment tend to be older boys with a high family income. They are targets probably because they spend a lot of time on social networking sites (SNSs) and prefer the online setting. With respect to parenting styles, the findings referred above provide strong bivariate support for the hypotheses which predicted that stricter rules, more involvement and more mediation exercised by parents would be linked to children and adolescents being less targeted for harassment, suffering less from privacy risks, and being less likely to be exposed to pornographic or violent content. The multivariate regression results indicate that strict parental rules, involvement, and mediation had no or few effects on suffering from harassment and privacy risks. This suggests that adolescents may or may not be the target of harassment and may be having private information solicited at home. They may be experiencing these risks in school or at friends' houses since the Internet is a ubiquitous medium. Therefore, even if parents have the strictest rules and mediation in the use of the Internet at home, adolescents may still be targets – neither parental supervision nor the use of filtering technology would decrease the solicitation risk. One interesting fact is that most teens today are often the household experts in computer use, which disrupted the parents' guiding role. Another sensitive concern most parents have is the easy access to pornographic and violent content online, which may present a tremendous negative impact on the psychological development of children and adolescents. Therefore, parents who exercise strict rules and provide guidance and mediation at home, generally reduce the seductive influence of pornography and violent content online.

Monitoring (tracking and surveillance) of children's behavior is considered an essential parenting skill. Numerous studies show that well-monitored youths are less involved in delinquency and other norm breaking behaviors, and scholars conclude that parents should track their children more carefully. Stattin and Kerr (2000: 1072-1085) point out that those monitoring measures typically assess parents' knowledge but not its source, and parents could get knowledge from their children's free disclosure of information as well as their own active surveillance efforts. In their study of 703 children aged 14 years in central Sweden and their parents, parental knowledge came mainly from child disclosure, and child disclosure was the source of knowledge that was the most closely linked to broad and narrow measures of delinquency (norm breaking and police contact). These results held for both children's and parents' reports, for both sexes, and were independent of whether the children were exhibiting problem behavior or not. They however, conclude that tracking and surveillance is not the best prescription for parental behavior and that a new prescription must rest on an understanding of the factors that determine child disclosure.

Clark (2011: 323-43) describes the theory of parental mediation, which has evolved to consider how parents utilise interpersonal communication to mitigate the negative effects that they believe communication media have on their children discussing the strengths and weaknesses of this theory as employed in the socio-psychologically rooted media effects literature as well as socio-cultural ethnographic research on family media uses concluding by suggesting that in addition to the strategies of active, restrictive, and co-viewing as parental mediation strategies, future research needs to consider the emergent strategy of participatory learning that involves parents and children interacting together with and through digital media.

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in the processes through which parents facilitate the development of their adolescent children. Jacobson and Crockett (2000) identify how parental monitoring ensures children's development and welfare. Through their empirical research, they support the association between parental monitoring and a variety of adjustment indicators such as grade point average, lower levels of adolescent depression, and lower levels of adolescent sexual activity and minor

delinquency. For example, higher levels of parental monitoring have been associated with lower levels of adolescent depression and lower levels of adolescent sexual activity and minor delinquencies. In their empirical study, they identify that bivariate correlations indicate that parental monitoring has strong associations with all indicators of adjustment for both boys and girls, with a rare exception of boys' depression (Jacobson and Crockett, 2000: 65-97).

Kimberly Young (1996: 237-244) writes that anecdotal reports indicate that some online users are becoming addicted to the Internet in much the same way as others became addicted to drugs or alcohol which resulted in academic, social, and occupational impairment. However, there is no unanimity among the sociologists, psychologists, or psychiatrists upon addressing and identifying the addictive use of the Internet as a problematic behavior. Her study investigated the existence of Internet addiction and the extent of problems caused by such potential misuse. Kimberly identifies 396 dependent Internet users (Dependents) and a control group of 100 non-dependent Internet users (Non Dependents) based upon the adapted version of the criteria for pathological gambling defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - Fourth Edition (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 1994); the qualitative analysis of this study suggests significant behavioral and functional differences in Internet usage between the two groups.

SUMMARY AND SUGGESTIONS

It is evident from the meta study, research and experiences that the young ones do need parental monitoring in some form in their ICT uses. The form and process of mediation may differ depending upon socio-cultural and demographics variations, but undoubtedly, it is the need of the hour. This is so, particularly because the young children are vulnerable to content coming on this largely 'ungoverned' digital space; and they most often fail to understand how this content may impact them psychologically, socially and even culturally. With increasing young users of new/digital media in India, parents have to realise that they have to exercise some sort of intervention as has been witnessed in many countries.

It is also required of parents that they remain honest and open in the conversations with their children about how cyber bullies attack others and why it's important that they (parents) stay involved to help them (young ones) in difficult situations. The parents should prevail upon children the need to monitor their mobile phones and social networking sites. The parents must assure their children that they are not interested in their personal information, rather they need to be there in case their children get caught in a difficult online situation that they don't know how to handle. The parents' first thought when it comes to monitoring social media might be: "Watching over my child's shoulder is prying into their personal life and is none of my business". Therefore, it must be noted that the parents while monitoring should not become a cyber stalker or a cell phone spy by going on their children's sites or by scrolling through their text messages without their knowledge. If they do so, they risk losing their children's trust in them, which could ruin their relationship forever. Instead, the parents should take the following measures to create awareness against online harassment and better utilisation of digital tools and services:

- Indian parents should constantly update/upgrade their knowledge and skills about information and communication technology and services. It has been found in several studies that parents' limitations in this field are the biggest impediment in effective monitoring of their children.
- Parents should set up a Google Alert for child's name and make sure to set the content filter to "strict" and include "all online searches".
- They should regularly and openly monitor all social media accounts until their children are mature enough to socialise online without supervision.
- They should see that their children obey the age limits that social networking sites have set for users.
- They should empower their children to Ignore/Block/Report.
- Parents must understand that online image protection, damage control, and proactive content monitoring are parental obligation and responsibility.
- Parents should be prepared to restrict mobile devices or Internet privileges when necessary.

- Parents should not be sneaky when monitoring – be straight and honest about what they are doing and how they are doing it.
- Parents should teach their children to have respect for other online users.
- Parents must advocate and attend school programmes that provide education and awareness about ICT uses and social media policies.

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Note: *This article is based on the report of a Major Research Project of this author sponsored by Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi, India.*